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The Poetic Rites of Conversation

Folkloric semiosis, the fashioning of verbal, kinesic, or material signs in traditional performance settings, customarily involves the production of stylized messages in which “the sign vehicle becomes an aspect of the expression form.”¹ In verbal folklore performances, the medium of expression itself, the spoken word with its attendant semantic coding, becomes an object of deliberate focus. The resulting speech exhibits, in greater or lesser degree, what Roman Jakobson defines as the poetic function of language, a “focus on the message for its own sake.”² The study of verbal folklore is thus one branch of poetics, the overarching study of poetic or verbal artistic composition.³

Additional components of folkloric semiosis mark verbal folklore performance as a distinctive branch of poetics:

(1) the tendency of the performer to work without the benefit of a script, relying instead on memorization and improvisation;

(2) the co-presence of performer and audience, creating the possibility of immediate audience feedback, or even of direct audience participation in the performance;

(3) reliance on an accessible rhetoric, composed of conventional resources (constantly reshaped) drawn from the aesthetic ecology of the speech community;

(4) a tendency for the message content, in its literal or figurative interpretation, to have direct impact on the current social scene (folklore as social rhetoric).

These attributes of folkloric semiosis distinguish the stylized messages of verbal folklore from other kinds of stylized messages, which may be more predictable and less variable (because they proceed from a script or a score), or more finished or veiled (because they embody an idiosyncratic aesthetic), or more detachable (because they lack an immediately utilitarian destiny).

A touch of frivolity inheres in all poetic messages, since they cannot be said to be resolutely referential. To some degree, every poetic message diverts our attention from the plane of content onto the plane of expression. Surely the historical and continuing abhorrence of the seemingly innocuous device of punning derives in part from this intrusion of frivolity into a supposedly circumspect discussion. The pun, which forces recognition of a semantic wrinkle in the linguistic code, draws attention to the code as a medium of expression, and thereby inhibits attending to the referential drift of the speech segment at hand. The common pun, once proscribed from the speech of the civil gentleman,⁴ is still a source of semi-facetious opprobrium in most conversational settings.

Conversational encounters are routinely perceived as forums for accomplishing social business. Unless they are explicitly given over to frivolity (and avowedly frivolous conversations do, of course, occur), they may be inhospitable to the introduction of poetic effects. The purposeful character of conversation is evident in recent formulations of the maxims of conversation.⁵ H. P. Grice, for example, describes four maxims at the heart of the Cooperative Principle:⁶

- (1) "Make your contribution as informative as is required."
- (2) "Make your contribution one that is true."
- (3) "Be relevant."
- (4) "Be perspicuous" (includes "Avoid obscurity of expression," and "Avoid ambiguity").

These maxims, proposed as part of a "rough general principle" governing ordinary conversational discourse, are clearly inimical to the introduction of large doses of poetic effect. Maxims 3 and 4 are especially hostile, since elaboration of the expression medium of speech is rarely either relevant or perspicuous, in the most narrow construction of these terms.

But in empirical observation, we rarely find conversationalists clinging desperately to maxims like those articulated in Grice's "Cooperative Principle." Instead, we find conversational speech sprinkled with poetic digression that is not narrowly relevant or perspicuous. In most conversational settings, verbal artistry is at least present; in a great many, it abounds. How can we account for this empirical observation, in the face of sound theoretical propositions that would lead in the opposite direction? In this essay, I will explore this tension between conversational purpose and poetic frivolity, in an attempt to identify a sanctioned role for verbal artistry in conversational settings. By invoking the concept of *the poetic rites of conversation*, I argue, in contradistinction to much previous analysis of the conversational mode, that certain poetic effects are not only allowed but even expected or required in ordinary conversation.

The poetic rites of conversation serve important ritual and rhetorical functions in social intercourse. In their ritualistic function, they appear at moments of juncture, to smooth over potential points of ritual danger. They are likely to be present during opening and closing frames, when the state of talk is either ratified or abandoned, and at points of transition within the flow of discourse, to maintain felicitous coordination of conversational roles. The location of poetic rites is less predictable when their motivation is primarily emotive or rhetorical. In this guise, they may appear as an indicator of the speaker's real or feigned emotional response to the topic at hand, or at any moment as a rhetorical tactic designed to persuade and influence the listener.

In my view, the most powerful statement about the ritual danger of talk comes from the work of Erving Goffman: "Once the exchange of words has brought individuals into a jointly sustained and ratified focus of attention, once that is, a fire has been built, any visible thing (just as any spoken referent) can be burnt in it."⁷ According to Goffman, conversation "ritually regularizes the risks and opportunities face-to-face talk provides."⁸ Conversation is deeply endowed with this ritual dimension, but in what follows, I will focus on the special ritual significance of specific moments in conversation.

Much is at stake in undertaking to converse. The benefits of felicitous conversation are many—the opportunity to tap into possibilities for collaboration among individuals, the fulfillment of self through the competent display of speaking ability, and the recognition of others through gestures of deference. Yet conversation has its risks as well, and infelicitous conversation can be just as destructive as felicitous conversation can be productive. Like fire, conversation can be alternately a blessing or a curse. The ritual elements in conversational discourse are meant to harness its constructive potential.

Ritual danger lurks especially at moments of transition in the flow of talk. Opening and closing gambits are highly charged with tension, and provoke the most elaborate ritual attention. Greetings and leave-takings are formalized speech acts in many societies, and frequently they are imbued with palpable poetic effect.⁹ The jocular call-response leave-taking in colloquial North American English,

—See you later, alligator,
—After a while, crocodile,

presents in miniature the poetic effects of sound patterning, allusiveness, and parallel structure that tend to cluster in these speech acts world-wide.

Moments of thematic transition within conversational discourse are also ritually problematic, but have received much less scholarly attention. Recent work in sociolinguistics has identified the issue of cohesion across utterance boundaries and participant turns as perhaps the core problematic in discourse analysis. Erving Goffman views conversation as “a sustained strip or tract of referencings, each . . . tending to bear, but often deviously, some retrospectively perceivable connection to the immediately prior one.”¹⁰ For conversationalist and analyst alike, the discrimination of relevance units from the undifferentiated stream of words is a task of paramount importance. As John Gumperz remarks, “We must scan the stream of talk to group words into clauses or utterances, to distinguish main from qualifying phrases and parenthetical remarks, so as to fit what we hear into a constant theme.”¹¹ Much of the grammatical apparatus of natural languages, as well as paralinguistic and gestural resources, falls into the service of this cohesion-building process in conversation.¹²

The ritual component of cohesion derives from the potential embarrassment of a disparate orientation on the part of two or more co-participants in a conversation. The threat of a loss of cohesion is always present, and people engaged in talk must take steps to insure a common orientation. Transitions between segments—between adjacent thematic moments—may be said to be ritually dangerous. In order to avoid confusion, topical closure must be accomplished with caution, so that a move to another topic stands out clearly and the transition can be gracefully navigated by one and all.

In North American English discourse, a number of stock formulas exist for this purpose, in the form of little meta-communicative devices that function as conversational sign-posts: “Not to change the subject, but . . . ,” “Along the same lines . . . ,” “Moving right along . . . ,” “Speaking of x . . . ,” etc. The fact that these formulas so often disavow exactly what they seek to achieve, or find their charter in the previous discourse, suggests that some degree of effrontery resides in the willful changing of topic. The ritual apparatus may be brought in at these junctures, to minimize the possibility of offense being taken, and to orient all present to the new thematic direction.

In such situations, topical closure stands as more than a mere matter of convenience, a means of riveting participant attention on a common plane of reference. In protecting the integrity of conversational participants, these machinations secure the social bond itself. Thus, stock meta-communicative formulas play a role in this process; but poetic rites also contribute to the accomplishment of smooth topical closure in conversation.

Frequently in the ethnography of communication, the inspection of some particular grammatical or sociolinguistic feature in an exotic setting will facilitate recognition of a similar phenomenon closer to home, perhaps in

the ethnographer's native language. Following this premise, I present a brief sketch of a language of public ceremony found among the Kamsá Indians of Andean Colombia.¹³ Kamsá ritual language is a prayerful oratory deeply imbued with a delicate sense of etiquette. Through its conceptual framework, it recreates the primordial community of the Kamsá ancestors, forming an overt link between the example of the ancestors and the situation at hand. Movement from one topic to another is highly ritualized.

One is never far from the sound of ritual language in Colombia's Sibundoy Valley, the homeland of the Kamsá community. Its distinctive linguistic and performance features make it readily audible, and the ritual language is an adjunct to a great many formal and less formal social occasions. Ritual language speeches are composed during performances on the basis of formulaic improvisation. It is employed obligatorily during formal ceremonial events, and optionally in the midst of conversations, where it can be used to entreat and persuade.

Kamsá ritual language exists in saturate and attenuated forms. These latter are comparable to rhetorical flourishes used to embellish common speech, and they are ubiquitous in routine discourse. A number of more formally constituted ceremonial events call forth ritual language speeches—the saturated forms. These speeches may be somewhat protracted: a ceremonial greeting might last approximately five minutes and involve the production of some 300 words. The basic thrust of these speeches is to locate the present encounter between two or more Kamsá individuals within the cosmological framework of the example laid down by the ancestors. Kamsá ritual language creates a prevailing sense of community by affirming through mutual consent a common prototype lending meaning to the fortuitous events of the present experience.

There are three types of content present in all Kamsá ritual language speeches. One category expresses the basic litany common to all ritual language discourse, a syncretic litany derived from the interaction between the traditional Kamsá preoccupation with the ancestors and the Christian dogma brought to the Sibundoy Valley by generations of Spanish missionaries. A second category expresses generic features characteristic of the particular occasion in which the ritual language speech is embedded, e.g., a visitation, a wedding, a thanksgiving celebration, the Kamsá carnival, etc. The third category, which will concern us most directly, could be thought of as the performative component of Kamsá ritual language, the one that renders ritual language speeches effective. This category consists of a group of blessing formulas that appear at regular intervals in the flow of ritual language discourse. In fact, they articulate the flow of speech into a sequence of neatly discriminable units, providing the participants with a clear guide to the transitions from one moment to another of ritual language speeches.

Perhaps the most common performative formula is the following:

cha-xu-wi-pasentsia	May He have mercy on me
cha-xu-wi-perdona	May He forgive me.

This speech act of beseeching the mercy of God occurs at pivotal moments in ritual language speeches. For example, in a ritual language greeting I recorded in the field, it appears exactly at the moment when the speaker has referred to the example of the ancestors:

cha-be mundo ts-j-i-ye-ts-a-shekwastona
In His world I am following in the footsteps of our ancestors.

Immediately following the beseeching formula, the speaker moves into his closing theme, a passing reference to the day of judgment when each must give account of “family, person, and soul.” The sequence is as shown below:

- (1) theme A: reference to the ancestors
- (2) beseeching forgiveness formula
- (3) theme B: reference to day of judgment

The beseeching formula paves the way for a transition from time condensed backwards into the past to time projected forwards into the future. These two perspectives on time, rotating around the blessing formula in the middle, comprehend the entire trajectory of the religious model of history fundamental to all Kamsá ritual language, and indeed to the Kamsá cosmology. But it is the beseeching of the blessing formula that allows a sure passage from time past into time future.

In a similar vein, thematic passages throughout ritual language discourse are marked (or better, made possible) by these performative formulas seeking the positive intervention of the Lord. Prosodic and performance features, notably phrasing and intonation, further demarcate these thematically discrete units. Kamsá ritual language speeches, highly charged with a conspicuous politeness, carefully bundle their thematic moments into readily separable units, through the office of these performative formulas. Transition in this speech format is precisely signaled, allowing little scope for deviation from a common orientation. Since Kamsá ritual language countenances simultaneous talk, it is all the more important to provide clear structural clues to the speakers, who must somehow coordinate and integrate their words even as the talking proceeds on both sides.

Kamsá ritual language, then, provides an illustration of a speech variety that places strong ritual constraints on topical juncture. Topical closure is formalized through the operation of a finite set of phrase patterns. These

formulaic expressions are poetically endowed, primarily through their parallelistic structures. They are poetic rites of conversation—in this instance, rites charged with the task of conducting ritual language speeches from one topic to the next.

Kamsá ritual language, a speech variety for ceremony, accentuates social etiquette through displays of mutual deference, generating a sense of mutual respect and social solidarity through reference to the all-embracing primordial Kamsá community. In this somewhat formal speech variety, transitions between topical segments of the speeches are accomplished in a highly ritualized fashion. Is there anything comparable in the speech of contemporary North Americans, whose conversations tend to be less formal, with less overt manifestations of etiquette?

I believe that proverbial expressions often play such a role in North American conversations, and that they can be construed as poetic rites of conversation, frequently charged with the task of smoothing over moments of transition between adjacent themes. In a number of conversational settings, I have observed proverbial expressions surfacing at moments of topical closure, as the conversation prepared to drift off into another direction.

To a degree that is perhaps surprising, in view of the many dire predictions concerning the demise of the proverb, modern-day English conversationalists continue to draw on the stock of traditional English proverbs.¹⁴ Pessimism concerning the survival of the proverb in modern industrialized societies may derive in large part from the unpredictable and occasional nature of proverb occurrence in conversational discourse. However, it is very doubtful that proverb usage in contemporary North America rivals the important role played by proverbs in notably proverb-rich societies, such as the Mediterranean societies and their off shoots, many African societies, or even Elizabethan England.

While proverbs are still quoted in contemporary North America, there is a trend towards citing proverbs, or recomposing them, without actually quoting them in full. These allusions or restatements are generally embedded within a non-proverbial sentence grammar. Henceforth, I will refer to these highly individualized and aborted proverb texts as *proverbialisms*. I would propose that this movement from the full proverb to the proverbialism, like the movement from the situational joke to the punch-line joke,¹⁵ or the shift from the metaphorical riddle to the linguistic riddle,¹⁶ is in some ways diagnostic of modern social conditions and modern tastes.

Archer Taylor noted long ago that the proverbial phrase “permits variation in person, number and tense” and he also spoke of *allusions* to the familiar proverbs.¹⁷ These tendencies towards the abbreviation of proverbs,

and toward the embedding of a proverbial core into non-proverbial sentence frames, are most likely present to some degree in every proverb corpus, but they have become especially pronounced in modern North American English conversations. The minimal frame might be the citation formula by itself, stripped of its actual proverbial content, as in, "Well, you know what they say. . . ." Here the listener is prompted to provide the proverbial content, which the speaker evidently felt was too obvious to produce.

A related device is to allude to the proverb by mentioning only one of its key words or phrases, as in, "There's a saying about that, you know, about *people living in glass houses*" (proverb citation in italics). The connection between the proverb content and the situation at hand may be stressed through expressions like the following: "It's a *too many cooks spoil the broth* situation, isn't it?" The proverb content is sometimes almost squeezed out of the picture: "I'd rather have *an even dozen in the hand*, wouldn't you?" Here the proverbial foundation, "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," is barely perceptible through its adaptation to a particular situation.

In some cases, speakers will actually invert, reverse, or otherwise pervert the original proverb content, in the quest for verbal creativity, as in the following recently observed dialogue:

- That's like killing two stones with one bird.
- I think you got that wrong. Ugh, poor bird!

Here the original proverbial expression, "to kill two birds with one stone," undergoes multiple transformations. First, it is embedded in a proposition that claims its applicability to a situation at hand. Moreover, the key words in the original change places, creating a highly innovative and semantically anomalous parody of the original. Finally, note that this perversion of a proverb incites a clever response from the addressee, moving the conversation away from its prior serious purpose toward avowedly frivolous talk.

The prominence of the proverbialism is a reflection of the value placed on originality and innovation in contemporary North American discourse. The marked disdain shown by many conversationalists towards quoting a familiar proverb in its entirety stands in stark contrast to the reverence accorded the traditional charter, the words of the elders, in many other societies.¹⁸ As I have suggested, the temper of the times, with its emphasis on novelty, on individual talent, and on competition, would seem to lie at the base of this transformation in proverb aesthetics. But of perhaps equal importance is the shrinking store of proverbs available to most speakers. Under these conditions, there is little possibility of finding a proverb that captures and renders a situation in a pleasing and even mildly surprising

manner. Denied access to this creative use of the whole proverb, and under the influence of the modern quest for novelty and personal realization, the contemporary proverb user leans towards the proverbialism, an original, personalized reshaping of the familiar proverbs.

Let me cite a paradigmatic case, and describe enough of the setting so that the ritual function of the proverbialism will be quite apparent. Recently I attended a meeting of the executive committee of my faculty union, where I witnessed a debate on the issue of whether or not to raise the dues. Cogent arguments were advanced on both sides. If we raised dues, we could recuperate more operating funds, and perhaps expand our watch-dog and informational services to the faculty. But raising dues would run the risk of losing some of our more tentative members.

As the discussion progressed, it appeared that the drift of public sentiment was towards leaving the dues structure intact. At what seemed a very opportune moment, our chapter president spoke up with the following statement: "I would *let sleeping dogs lie* on that one." This statement effectively terminated the discussion. Our chapter president had ratified the emerging consensus by invoking a pre-coined item, a proverb which he embedded within a declarative sentence framed in the first person singular mode. The dues structure would remain the same; the committee moved on to other matters.

This incident is illuminating from several points of view. First, I might mention the "out-of-context" character of the proverb. Proverbial language often involves a figurative reading, wherein the elements in a situation are metaphorically equated with entities mentioned in the proverb.¹⁹ In the present instance, nothing at all had been said about dogs, yet a reference to "sleeping dogs" was taken perfectly in stride. Apparently we all landed on the most plausible interpretation, which would relate the prudent handling of a sleeping dog to the prudent handling of our union's dues structure. Just as the sleeping dog is harmless while asleep, though potentially dangerous if aroused, the present dues structure seemed to be working out tolerably well, while modification could lead to unnecessary problems.

This use of a proverbialism is an example of what Kenneth Burke calls strategical naming.²⁰ There is a strong rhetorical bite to this situated use of a proverb. Prior to its invocation, the debate was amenable to different interpretations, since valid arguments were posed on both sides of the issue. But with the quotation and acceptance of this particular proverb, what was previously a genuine issue became redefined as a non-issue, for who would be so foolish as to risk stirring a mutt from its reverie?

Third, by citing a proverb at this particular moment, the chapter president crystallized an emergent mood of agreement, and thus brought about topical closure in a way acceptable to all present. Topical closure here

was clearly marked by the figurative language of the proverb; moreover, the proverb content, through a process of metaphorical reasoning, provided a sense of finality to the issue, by aligning the present decision with a more general class of prudent decisions.

And finally, I have already noted the incorporation of the proverb core into a non-proverbial sentence structure. This proverbialism is created not by truncating the source material, but by placing it within a larger, personalized frame. This construction, incidentally, forced the listeners to insert a syntactic chasm between the words of the proverb and the non-proverbial sentence frame. If the proverb material is treated not as an idiom but rather as a linear, divisible component of the sentence, then the unintended reading, "I would let sleeping dogs *lie on that one*," is possible. As it happened, those present had no more trouble sorting out this grammatical irregularity than they did piecing together a plausible interpretation of the proverb's figurative language.

I will adduce one final instance of a proverbialism used in accomplishing topical closure, this time from a casual conversational setting. The scene is a festive occasion among friends, most of whom are spelunkers. The three main protagonists are Barb and Pam, who live in the house where the party is taking place, and Kate, their slightly exotic visitor. The conversation takes place in a side room, with several friends present. While its tone is casual, even free-wheeling, there is in fact a serious purpose to this talk, for the solidarity of the group has been threatened by two possible transgressions, neither of them malicious. Kate somewhat unabashedly (it could be thought) showed up at Pam and Barb's house expecting a place to stay. Pam and Suz, who were on the premises when Kate arrived, had never met her, but once they established that Kate was a member of the group (all belong to a statewide caving society), they came to an understanding that Kate should indeed stay with them.

The real problem arose when Barb, who *had* met Kate before, arrived and failed to recognize her. Kate's liability is that she took the liberty of imposing a little on people she didn't know very well, though all in the interest of joining a locally-sponsored group activity. Kate's aggravation is that Barb, her presumed friend, failed to immediately recognize her. In the brief conversational excerpt I have pulled out from an evening full of talk, much of this recent history is played out as the women exchange their versions of these events, all within the nurturing context of fellow group members, who make their presence felt through supportive rounds of laughter at critical points. The women air their feelings, ratify a consensual interpretation of the events, and in the process restore a sense of mutual trust and understanding so that the integrity of the group emerges unscathed. What is

more, topical closure is achieved through the recitation of a highly idiosyncratic proverbialism.

- Barb: That's the thing, 'cause I didn't recognize you.
 I think, did you *know* that I didn't recognize you?
 Kate: Uh huh.
 Barb: And // uh
 5 Kate: // Well, I mean I didn't expect you to //
 I, you know, I just popped in.
 Barb: //But you really look different when you've
 got your hair down.
 Kate: I know.
 Barb: And I remembered you, you know //
 10 and I knew automatically that I ought to know you
 Kate: //This is why you said,
 "I know you from somewhere."
 Barb: Yeah, but that's what //
 Kate: //"Oh, your hair, your hair," you know
 15 Barb: Right, Well, I knew, you know//
 Kate: // Uh huh
 Barb: your face'n stuff,
 but I just, I couldn't remember
 and after about two sentences I realized that
 you were a caver //
 20 Kate: // yeah
 Barb: but at first your accent sounds kind of like,
 I've got a friend named Eli,
 and she's from, from, uh, Sweden,
 and your accent sounds slightly Scandinavian.
 25 And I thought, well, you know,
 maybe you're a friend of Eli's //
 Pam: Scandinavian?
 John: ()
 Barb: No, really
 30 Kate: I've been called a lot of things //
 Pam: But not Irish?
 Kate: But not Irish
 John: Never anything // ()
 Kate: // No, no one ever thinks I'm Irish
 35 Pam: Yeah
 Barb: But, uh, you know //

Key: // indicates simultaneity of talk

() indicates unintelligible speech

Line breaks correspond to tone-group boundaries.

- Pam: // Well, she walked in the door and said,
 "Uh, is Barb here?"
 "No."
- 40 "Well I need a place to crash"
 And Suz and I went, "Uuuuh."
 (group laughter)
 and then I said, you know, "Are you a caver?" //
- John: // You did this?
- 45 Pam: Yeah, and then we said,
 "Well all right, you can stay"
- Barb: But uh //
- Pam: // No, we didn't go that far
- Kate: I don't remember that
- 50 (loud group laughter)
- Barb: But after that, and then,
 I remembered Tracy's name,
 but I couldn't picture Tracy,
 when you showed me the picture it all just, you know,
- 55 immediately fell in place //
- Kate: // yeah
- Barb: but you know, I just felt so foolish,
 'cause I knew I knew you,
 but I couldn't remember your *name*,
 60 and I couldn't remember you know,
 exactly under what circumstances,
 so I was kind of,
 felt like a fool, (laughs)
 my foot in my ear or something.²¹

The considerable intensity of this apparently innocuous conversational extract reminds us that conversation, especially in a group situation, is a prominent form of social drama. The entire extract could be seen as a patch, splicing together group solidarity so that group activities could proceed in conscious harmony. Since the previous episodes had brought about possibilities of embarrassment and resentment among group members, this exchange might be viewed as a mending ritual, directed towards the resumption of friendly relations amongst fellow cavers. The participants rehearse the problematic history, in order to sort out impressions and ratify an official interpretation of the incidents involved. They re-live these events, providing glosses concerning their perceptions and feelings at each moment in the narrated episodes. These personal experience narratives thus serve the purpose of bringing back to mind the relevant action, so that intentions and deductions can be verified and clarified, and a consensual—and positive—interpretation can be achieved.

Barb initiates the process by admitting openly that she did in fact fail to recognize Kate. She then seeks confirmation from Kate that she (Kate) did notice that she wasn't recognized by her (Barb). Kate admits as much (line 3), so the major source of tension is out in the open. Each of the principals then finds a mitigating circumstance: Kate, in line 6, lets Barb off the hook by confessing that she had "just popped in" and therefore didn't really expect to be recognized; she thus states fairly her own liability in the case, that of having dropped in without prior warning (more about this later). Barb, for her part, attributes her failure to recognize Kate to a number of factors. She makes it clear, for one thing, that she did *remember* Kate; her inability to make a positive identification had to do with a change in hair styling, and in a momentary confusion over a "slightly Scandinavian accent." While Barb is rehearsing this earlier encounter from her point of view, Kate is making conciliatory gestures in the guise of narrative co-performance. Kate produces two direct quotes from the earlier encounter, each one supporting the overall drift of Barb's recapitulation (in lines 12 and 14).

This first stab at the matter winds down around line 26, when a very important moment of group catharsis intervenes. The issue is trivial—Barb has detected a trace of Scandinavian in Kate's accent. Kate, who was actually born and raised in Ireland, relates how she is habitually attributed many nationalities, but never the Irish one. There is a good deal of laughter associated with this interlude. The group relaxes as the main issue is briefly defused through a discussion of a related, but less threatening matter, the generic tendency of people to misplace Kate in terms of her national origin.

With line 36 we see that Barb is anxious to resume her account, but Pam, Barb's roommate, seizes the floor to recite a corollary narrative, depicting Kate's arrival at the door of their house. The rising spirits of the group, which appears to have sensed that the real danger is over, are quite evident in this segment. A great deal of aimless hilarity arises and it may be this laughing together that seals the accord emerging from this moment of interaction. Here Kate's brazen request for lodgings is played out explicitly, and the pivotal moment in the narrative occurs when Kate's identity as a caver is established (line 43). Earlier (line 20) this same factor was influential in Barb's uncanny feeling that she ought to know who Kate was: "I knew you were a caver." Within the company of fellow cavers, the importance of being a caver is twice mentioned. For this reason, group solidarity may be said to be the issue at stake in this conversational extract.

Barb is persistent, and in line 51 she returns to her narrative, which we now see has been "on hold." There are two further points she wants to put on record: first, it was through a common friend, Tracy, that the appropriate

identification was made. We can infer that Kate had to actually produce a photo of Tracy before things fell into place: Kate's aggravation was indeed substantial. Lastly, Barb wants to convey her feelings at the moment of recognition, and she does this in the concluding segment of the excerpt. Barb felt foolish, apparently realizing that her failure to recognize Kate could be construed as (1) a serious affront to Kate, and (2) a sign of Barb's social incompetence. The intensity of her chagrin afterwards tends to mitigate against either of these awkward interpretations.

The final utterance of the extract is, of course, a proverbialism, adapted from the proverbial phrase "to put one's foot in one's mouth." While this locution is in several ways anomalous, structurally it works unequivocally as a device of topical closure, or, a poetic rite of conversation. The anomaly of Barb's pronouncement, "my foot in my ear or something," resides primarily in two areas: first, the proverbial phrase upon which this proverbialism is based does not readily address the situation at hand, since Barb's error was not one of misspeaking; and second, the idiosyncratic touch placed on this original source material results in a murky image of uncertain semantic properties.

In a broad, generic sense, the misplacing of one's foot, wherever it inadvertently lands, could stand for the notion of what Erving Goffman calls "improperly guided behavior."²² At this level of generality, Barb's allusion fits the situation at hand, since Barb's failure to recognize Kate could be taken as an instance of improperly guided behavior. Following this line of analysis, it would appear that Barb's substitution of "ear" for "mouth" (which transforms the proverbial phrase into a proverbialism) bears an odd affinity to the situation at hand, though at first blush it certainly creates the impression of anomaly. The rationale would be that just as Barb's error was one of failure to receive a message rather than failure to produce a message, the appropriate organ to implicate in clumsiness is the ear rather than the mouth.

It is not immediately clear why the image of placing one's foot in one's mouth should represent misspeaking in the first place. Granted, a foot (or any part thereof) in the mouth would likely produce phonetically garbled speech, but this proverbial phrase normally refers to hasty or inappropriate speech rather than garbled speech. Additionally, the kinesic effort involved in raising the foot to the mouth somehow models the extreme inappropriateness of certain unfortunate utterances. What happens in this excerpt is that Barb's reworking of the source material forces (at least potentially) a re-evaluation of this familiar expression. Thus proverbialisms, as reworkings or parodies of conventional material whose figurative clout has often become somewhat weak, can operate to revive and revitalize the clichéd

sources. Proverbialisms sometimes function to “de-automatize” their source proverbs.²³

In any case, Barb chooses to wrap up her expiatory narrative with a proverbialism, which graphically recreates Barb’s sense of embarrassment (“I was kind of, felt like a fool”). Only after the proverbial words are spoken does she relent, and allow the conversation to drift to other matters. Once again, a proverbialism enters the conversation to facilitate the achievement of topical closure, producing another poetic rite of conversation.

The interface of poetics and conversation is a complex matter, and the present discussion has treated only a small fragment. I have argued that although the two frames, conversation and poetry, are in some ways incompatible, nonetheless there is a role for verbal artistry in conversations. While in some instances poetic elaboration of a functional message form may be subversive of conversational purpose, there are moments when poetic elaboration is not only allowed but even expected.

I have confined the discussion to a structurally motivated poetics of conversation, by identifying what I call poetic rites devoted to the felicitous movement from one theme to another in conversational discourse. I have said little about other sources of poetic elaboration, such as those that occur as a sign of a speaker’s emotive response to what is being said, or in the service of a speaker’s rhetorical goals. These aperiodic poetic effects also merit close inspection. In many conversational settings, a speaker who cannot embroider speech with verbal artistry is no speaker at all. And there are conversations that are saturated with poetic effects, wherein the purposeful nature of conversation is held in abeyance so that wit and frivolity may flourish.

But in all conversational settings, however earnest, a structural role exists for poetic embellishment as a rite of conversation. In the Kamsá ritual language speech variety, a parallelistic blessing formula is inserted at moments of topical transition. In some North American English conversations and discussions, proverbial language appears at these points of thematic juncture. Whole proverbs do occur in this milieu, but more common are the personalized revisions of proverb texts I call proverbialisms. I should stress here that not all proverbialisms occur at these structural points of transition in conversation; their range is far broader. By the same token, thematic transition is not accomplished exclusively through proverbialisms.

A final issue is the logic connecting poetry and ritual in the poetic rites of conversation. Why should poetic effects be endowed with ritual power? Why is poetic language endowed with a special efficacy not present in ordinary discourse? The proverbialism can be considered a miniature, improvised poetic form. It typically displays artistic patterning at the level of the

signifier (in the form of sound play and grammatical patterning), and at the level of the signified (in the form of allusive or figurative language). These poetic effects set the proverbialism apart as an interpolated chunk of stylized discourse within a less stylized discourse context. This differentiation is the first requisite to attaining ritual efficacy.

Kamsá ritual language, too, exhibits palpable differentiation from other Kamsá speech varieties. It is spoken rapidly, and its phrasing and intonation lend it an aura of prayer or chanting. Moreover, the accumulation of morphemes in the verb, and the use of a specialized vocabulary further distinguish this speech variety. Kamsá ritual language as a whole stands apart from other modes of discourse, and entire ritual language speeches can be said to possess a special ritual efficacy, the capacity to revalidate the social bond through reference to a primordial Kamsá community. Within ritual language speeches, the parallel structure of the blessing formulas even further marks them as formal entities. They perform a rite of transition within the ritual language discourse context.

In the Kamsá setting, ritual efficacy is variable depending on a number of factors, primarily formalization and accessibility. The ritual whistling and chanting of the shaman is thought to have brute performative power, an efficient efficacy whereby the production of sound alone can bring about changes in the state of reality. This discourse mode is highly formalized, shading off into pure music, and extremely inaccessible: only other shamans can perform and interpret this mode of speech, which is addressed to supernatural agents.

The ritual language discussed here occupies a middle ground between this highly efficacious speech and ordinary Kamsá discourse, which is thought to have no special transformative power, unless abetted by an infusion of ritual language elements. The set of contrasts is summarized below:

<i>Speech Style</i>	<i>Degree of formalization</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Efficacy</i>
shaman's chant	very high (musical)	supernatural	performative
ritual language	high (poetic)	social	ceremonial
ordinary speech	moderate (grammatical)	personal	referential

We can observe, then, a systematic association between discourse form, the range of the discourse (in terms of its avowed mission), and its efficacy. I have referred elsewhere to these webs of formal and functional stipulations as semiotic constitutions.²⁴

In the proverbialism, as in the discourse of Kamsá ritual language, a constant association exists between poetic effects (or formalization) and

efficacy of the resulting speech. Of course, this correlation transcends these conversational environments, and has been adduced in many religious, ritual, oratorical, and poetic traditions.²⁵ An explanation for this special power of measured and allusive language may be found in the unique properties of the poetic sign: its highly patterned aural texture, and its figurative referential strategy.

Poetic signs present a highly determined aural texture. The acoustic signal is structured beyond the normal levels found in non-poetic discourse. This structuring would include the conventional prosodic effects of meter, rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and assonance as well as a number of paralinguistic effects, such as intonation, pacing, phrasing, and others. Palpable structuring of the acoustic environment seems to produce strong physiological effects on living organisms.²⁶ Depending on the gradation of these effects, poetic textures can be soothing (as in the lullaby) or emotionally arousing (as in the sermon or oratorical speech). Measured speech can work changes on the mood, even to the extent of causing an altered state of consciousness.²⁷ Surely, then, the highly patterned aural structure of the poetic sign, with its ability to profoundly affect the state of consciousness, constitutes one contributing factor to the special efficacy of poetic speech.

Moreover, highly patterned aural textures, with their illusion of time transfixed, of sound chained within a regular cadence, lend speech segments an air of permanence and necessity, a kind of objective existence apart from the moment of articulation. Phrases impinging on the ear as tightly structured units of sound often seem to possess a degree of stability, a transcendence of the accidental, that is lacking in speech segments with a less determined aural texture. In the verbal lore of children,²⁸ or in the incantations of priestly poets,²⁹ these periodic textural effects endow their utterances with an aura of cosmic teleology.

Another factor must be sought in the figurative reach of poetic language. Poetic imagery is referentially duplicitous: It refers to things by other than their names. One sign substitutes for another. It is thus capable of conjuring up a new vision, a reality reformulated and only accessible to the initiated. Even local images can strike one as transcendent; when they are global (that is, systematized), they can encode a version of reality more compelling than one constructed from fragmentary sensory data. Poetic imagery creates a transcendental vision of reality, one that is the special prerogative of the *cognoscenti*, or the proselyte.³⁰

The combination of physiological impact on the organism and transcendental vision, effects of poetic language attaching to the signifier and signified, could well account for the special efficacy of poetic language. Religious litany is deeply endowed with these qualities, and may draw

much of its impact from them. Secular poetry too may be said to derive much of its affective power from this interplay. In short, I contend that the analysis developed here applies to all poetic language, though in each instance the type and degree of stimulus patterning, and the character of the figurative world, would vary according to local conditions.

Kamsá ritual language, with its palpable textural patterning, and its steeping in religious imagery, presents no serious difficulties to this mode of analysis. The proverbialisms discussed here appear to be less amenable to this interpretation of poetic efficacy, since their textural effects are less palpable, and their conceptual excursions less integrated. Nonetheless, if we are to take the poetic rites of conversation seriously, we must accord even these abbreviated poetic forms a degree of ritual efficacy.

Consider the statement "I would let sleeping dogs lie on that one." The proverbial kernel here does possess a tightly packed aural texture. Monosyllabic words beginning with the sound /l/ frame a more fluid intermediate speech segment dominated phonetically by the presence of the sibilants /s/ and /z/. These phonetic effects correlate with a grammatical parsing which locates an interpolated noun phrase (sleeping dogs) within the embrace of a segmented verb phrase (let . . . lie). Variable phrasings of this proverbial kernel are possible, and its location within a non-proverbial sentence frame may also influence its pronunciation. But any oral performance of this proverb must necessarily start from this distinctive aural texture, a product of the kinds of sound patterning described above.

On the figurative plane, we can detect a movement away from the world of immediate experience, that is, from the situation at hand, to a world based on immanent reality principles. Proverbialisms transport us to a world of almost mythological prototypes, where Sleeping Dogs are better left alone.³¹ Even in their brief purview, a transcendental vision of reality is momentarily sustained.

The humble proverbialism, then, like the blessing formula in Kamsá ritual language, and the litany of religious language around the world, partakes of the special efficacy associated with poetic discourse. A rationale exists for the introduction of poetic effects into conversational discourse, a motive for the poetic rites of conversation. These segments of highly patterned and allusive language, these highly stylized speech segments, acquire the special efficacy of poetic discourse, and serve vital ritual functions in the negotiation of conversation.

NOTES

1. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 266.
2. Roman Jakobson, "Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 356.
3. Aristotle, *Poetics* (many editions).
4. Victorian treatises on etiquette generally condemn the pun. Sigmund Freud refers to it as "the lowest form of verbal joke," in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: Norton, 1960), p. 45.
5. H. Paul Grice, *Logic and Conversation*. 1967 William James Lectures, Harvard University. Cited in other studies, for example, Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977) and Lauri Carlson, *Dialogue Games: An Approach to Discourse Analysis* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1983). Partially published in H. P. Grice, "Further Notes on Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 9, *Pragmatics*, ed. P. Cole (N. Y.: Academic Press, 1978), pp. 113-27.
6. Grice, "Logic and Conversation."
7. Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 37.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
9. See, for example, Judith Irvine, "Strategies of Status Manipulation in the Wolof Greeting," and Anne Salmond, "Rituals of Encounter among the Maori: Sociolinguistic Study of a Scene," both in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, ed. Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).
10. Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, p. 72.
11. John Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 101.
12. See M. A. K. Halliday and R. Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (London: Longman, 1976).
13. John McDowell, "The Semiotic Constitution of Kamsá Ritual Language," *Language in Society* 12 (1983): 23-46.
14. See Barbara and Wolfgang Mieder, "Tradition and Innovation: Proverbs in Advertising," *Journal of Popular Culture* 11 (1977): 308-19, for a citation of several dire predictions concerning the modern proverb.
15. See Francis Utley and Dudley Flamm, "The Urban and the Rural Jest (with an Excursus on the Shaggy Dog)," *Journal of Popular Culture* 2 (1960): 563-77.
16. John McDowell, *Children's Riddling* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).
17. Archer Taylor, "Proverb," and "Proverbial Phrase," in *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, ed. Marie Leach (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1950), pp. 902-906.
18. This aura of reverence is apparent in the novel by Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Fawcett, 1959). It is cited in scholarly studies such as John

Messenger, "The Role of Proverbs in a Nigerian Judicial System," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 15 (1959): 64-73. See also Kwesi Yankah, "The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1985).

19. Peter Seitel, "Proverbs: A Social Use of Metaphor," *Genre* 2 (1969): 143-61.

20. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), p. 1.

21. This text is prepared from a tape recording I made in Austin, Texas, in 1971.

22. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), especially pp. 21-26.

23. Jan Mukarovsky, "The Esthetics of Language," in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure and Style*, ed. Paul Garvin (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1964).

24. McDowell, "The Semiotic Constitution of Kamsá Ritual Language."

25. See, for example, the essays in *Language in Religious Practice*, ed. William Samarin (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1976), especially Dennis Tedlock, "From Prayer to Reprimand." See also S. Tambiah, "The Magical Power of Words," *Man* 3 (1968): 175-208.

26. See Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967); also Franz Boas, "Stylistic Aspects of Primitive Literature," *Journal of American Folklore* 38 (1925): 329-39.

27. A number of studies have associated measured sound with the production of altered states of consciousness, with or without the use of psychodysleptics. See, for example, the essays in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, ed. Michael Harner (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) and in *Flesh of the Gods: The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens*, ed. Peter Furst (New York: Praeger, 1972). Also Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971). A dissertation by Abraham Cáceres, "In Xochitl, In Cuicatl: Hallucinogens and Music in Mesoamerican Amerindian Thought" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1984), contains some very interesting materials along these lines. See also the essays in *Trance and Possession States*, ed. R. Prince (Canada: l'Imprimerie Electra, 1968).

28. See Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

29. For example, the discussion of the incantation associated with Kula in Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge, 1922).

30. See Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979) and Barbara Meyerhoff, *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

31. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskii argue that "in the mythological consciousness a sign is analogous to a proper noun" in their article, "Myth-Name-Culture," in *Semiotics and Structuralism: Readings from the Soviet Union*, ed. H. Baran (White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1974), p. 6.